

The Strange Disappearance of Mr. Knickerbocker by ObeyDontStray

Category: Stranger Things - Fandom

Genre: Adventure, Disapperance, Multi, OC charater - Freeform

Language: English

Characters: Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lenny Knickerbocker OC, Will Byers

Relationships: Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-05-28

Updated: 2017-05-28

Packaged: 2022-04-02 00:33:47

Rating: Mature

Warnings: Graphic Depictions Of Violence

Chapters: 1

Words: 3,384

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Hopper has a friendship with the local town drunk, Lenny Knickerbocker. When Lenny goes missing, what will Hopper and the Byers family do to find him?

Entry for the Stranger Things Big Bang on Tumblr

The Strange Disappearance of Mr. Knickerbocker

Author's Note:

Lenny is based heavily from Tom Waits. A little of his dialogue is from Tom's songs. When you read of Lenny, imagine Tom Waits.

Hop balanced the phone between his cheek and his shoulder, scribbling down an accident report. "I just wanted to invite you to dinner tonight, Hop. Jonathan and I made a little extra this week so we're grilling and having a camp fire. I've already stocked up on beer for you. Will is looking forward to seeing you."

He sighed. How could he say no to that? "I can't. I already promised someone else I'd take them out to dinner."

"Who is she?" Joyce teased.

"Lenny Knickerbocker, actually. Him and Mrs. Rose are fighting again and she kicked him out last week. I promised him a hot and a cot for the night."

"Poor Lenny can't catch a break. You both should come over for dinner." Joyce sympathized. Lenny had always been a gentleman to her, despite what everyone in town said about him. The outcasts had to stick together, after all.

"You sure?" Hop asked, pausing his paperwork. "You know Lenny's a little...eccentric."

"Aren't we all?" Joyce laughed. "Lenny's got character."

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Hopper walked to the open door of the holding cell, looking at the old man on the cot in the corner. Lenny Knickerbocker's in his early fifties but his haggard, angular features and craggy complexion give him an older appearance. He served in Vietnam alongside a young Hopper, but got sent home early for a bullet in the leg. Over the years

he shared plenty of his misadventures with Hopper, all his ill gotten knowledge and scars and tattoos.

"Hey Lenny, wake up." Hopper called. "We've got a dinner date."

Lenny adjusted his fedora over his eyes. "With who?"

"Joyce Byers invited us over."

Lenny grinned from beneath his hat. "You're fire and she's gasoline, young man. You been burning for that one a long time, ain't ya?" Hopper huffed, leaning against the doorway of the cell. "Either way you're loving every second of it."

"Can we leave that kind of talk here? Things aren't like that between me and her." Hopper replied.

"Not yet, anyway. You know she drives you crazy and you wouldn't have it any other way." Lenny smirked.

"It's no wonder Mrs. Rose kicked you out again with all the shit you talk. You're no good, Lenny."

Lenny grinned and gave a throaty, smokey laugh, pushing his hat back on his head. "No good you say?" He said. "You're the same kind of bad as me, kid. Say, can I borrow your washroom for a second? Make myself presentable?"

Hop nodded, gesturing towards the bathroom with a nod of his head.

Outside Lenny stopped to gather a handful of wildflowers and pressed them into Hopper's hand. When Hop shot him a quizzical look, Lenny laughed. "That'll mean more to her than anything in this world, believe me."

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Joyce welcomed them at the front door, dressed in a flowy cut blouse and jeans. "Hop! Lenny! Just in time! Will's out back roasting marshmallows." Lenny took her hand and kissed the back of it, causing her to smile. "Lovely as always, Joyce."

"Good to see you, Lenny." Joyce said warmly. Hop stood behind Lenny, suddenly feeling very out of place and awkward in his uniform. "Hello, Hop." Joyce smiled up at him. "How was work?"

"Slow." He responded a little too quickly, as if he'd rehearsed the short line over and over. When Joyce's eyes traveled to the bundle of flowers in his hand he suddenly remembered he was holding them. "Oh, yeah! These, um, are for you." He said presenting her with the blue and purple wildflowers.

"Oh these are pretty! Thank you, Hop." She smiled warmly up at him, standing on her tiptoes suddenly. Instinctively he bent down to meet her and she pressed a kiss to his bearded cheek. "I'll find a vase for them. They'll look so pretty with my new tablecloth." Lenny winked at him as he hung his coat on the coatrack. When she exited the room to find a vase, Lenny turned to him.

"Love her till the wheels come off, son. If you find someone to hold, don't trade it for silver or gold."

Out back Jonathan manned the grill, flipping the steaks. He regarded Hop with his usual look of distrust but widened his eyes momentarily at the sight of Lenny. Lenny waved to the young man and Jonathan waved back.

"Hello Chief! Hello Mr. Knickerbocker!" Will called from the fire where he was busy assembling s'mores.

"Please kid, call me Lenny. Mr. Knickerbocker was my father." Lenny commented, pulling up one of the mismatched lawn chairs to warm himself at the fire. The sun was just beginning to dip in the sky and the air was already crisp feeling, bringing a slightly comfortable chill to the edges of everything. Will stood and ran to Jonathan, passing him a freshly made s'more.

"Would you like one, Lenny? Chief?" He asked. "Lemme see your cooking skills there, kid." Lenny replied and Will set to work, dangling a marshmallow over the fire on a straightened wire hanger. Jim grabbed a chair on the other side of Will and took a seat. Joyce reappeared and offered both of the men beer. They gladly accepted and she sat down next to Jim with one of her own. They opened their

beers in unison.

Jim cleared his throat. "So how have you been, Joyce?" He asked as if he hadn't just checked in on her the day before. She shrugged. "Work was busy as usual. Donald really keeps me busy. Jonathan's been such a dear with helping Will with his homework." Jim took a swig of his beer.

Will presented Lenny with a s'more. "Are you sure you don't want one, Chief?" Hop considered for a moment. "Actually, I'll take one, Will."

"You're a good cook, young man." Lenny said as he took a second bite of his s'more. "Who taught you how to make s'mores?"

"Chief did a couple of weeks ago." Will smiled, passing a cookie to Hopper. "He promised to take me camping this summer."

"Sounds like fun." Lenny said, eyeing Hopper with a sly smile. "Say, Will, wanna go for a walk? We need some more wood for the fire. Come with us, Jon."

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"Poor kids, they're probably getting an ear full of one of Lenny's stories." Jim teased.

"He's always got something interesting to say. One day I hope my life is half as interesting as his." Joyce smiled. "Just his voice alone makes him sound like he's had quite a life."

"He's had a pretty adventurous one. I think it's because he never hesitates to say 'fuck it'." Jim laughed. "Who would have thought we'd be envying Lenny Knickerbocker, eh?" He commented as he moved to feed another log to the fire.

When he stood and turned back towards her Joyce was standing so close he could smell her sweet perfume. Desperate to touch her, he reached out and tucked her hair behind one ear. "There's something I've been wanting to tell you." She said lowly, her eyes trained on the ground.

"Yeah?" He asked breathlessly, preparing to hear whatever she was thinking.

"Yeah. Fuck it." She giggled as she pulled him forward to kiss him. The kiss was deep and passionate, surprising the both of them. She slowly explore his warm mouth, finally kissing him after spending so much time daydreaming about it. She pressed her hands to his chest, smoothing her thumb across the badge on his chest. "I've waited a long time to do that." She admitted when she broke away.

"What took you so long?" He asked, his voice hoarse. He grasped her gently by the hips and pulled her closer before dipping low to kiss her again.

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In the woods Will and Jonathan ventured away from Lenny, filling their arms with wood. Lenny's whiskey and gravel voice floated through the trees, "I'm just a poor wayfaring stranger, traveling through this world below. There is no sickness, no toil, nor danger in that bright land to which I go-" His voice came to an abrupt stop and both boys turned to look at the direction from which he was singing moments ago.

The two boys looked at each other suddenly, then back to the trees. "Lenny?" Jonathan called out into the darkness. They waited a full heartbeat before calling out to him again. "Lenny!" They called in unison. "Lenny!"

Jim broke their kiss to look towards the woods. "What was that?" Joyce said breathless, her lips kiss darkened.

"Lenny!" They heard the kids call. Taking her hand, Hop lead her to the edge of the woods and beyond. "Will! Jonathan?" He called. When they called back he followed their voices.

"Lenny's missing!" Will called to them as they approached. Hop squinted in the darkness to the trees around them, looking for any sign of the wine colored dress shirt Lenny had been wearing. He pulled the flashlight from his belt and pointed it at the trees around

them. "Lenny!" He called in his booming voice. "Lenny!"

The four of them stood in silence, listening to the sound of the woods around them. Everything was as silent as a church until an owl hooted from a nearby tree, causing the entire group to jump. The bird flew from his perch overhead and Joyce pulled her boys in close, the atmosphere becoming cold and frightening. She reached out to touch Hop's shoulder and felt the tension there as he held a cop's stance in front of her, the beam of his flashlight hopping from tree to tree. "Go back to the house, now!" He breathed to the family standing behind him as he unholstered his gun.

Joyce reached out for his forearm. "There's no way I'm leaving you. Jonathan, take Will to the house and keep him safe." Both boys made a sound of protest but Joyce glared at them. "You too Joyce." Hop asserted.

"I'm not leaving you!" She argued. "I didn't leave you then, I'm not leaving you now. You need an extra pair of eyes!"

Jonathan pulled Joyce close for a quick hug. "Be safe!" He said lowly, taking Will by the shoulder. Will didn't move when Jonathan began walking. He held a far away expression, his eyes trained on the trees.

"The barn." He whispered. Joyce squatted to his level and his eyes changed, focusing onto her face. "Don't go into that barn!"

Joyce questioned him about the cryptic statement and he couldn't give her any information at all, unaware that he had even said it. "I don't know! I don't know!" He asserted.

Jonathan escorted Will through the line of trees at the edge of the woods, ushering this little brother to the house. Joyce breathed in heavily through her nose and out of her mouth, Hopper could visibly see her shaking. "Joyce, Joyce honey. Breathe." He reached for her with open arms and she sunk into them. "We're going to find him. He couldn't have gone far. We'll find him just like we found Will. And he'll be fine." Her body trembled against his violently.

A shrill voice screamed Hopper's name through the trees and he stiffened in Joyce's embrace. "Lenny!" He trained his flashlight to the

west, brandishing his gun. "Stay close to me, sweetheart." And her hand found its way to his lower back, hooking her index finger into his belt loop, desperate to touch him somehow. To be grounded by him.

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At the sound of the scream the boys froze at the backdoor of their house, Jonathan's hand on the doorknob. The boys shared a look. "We've got to go back." Will said flatly.

"You can't go back out there, it's dangerous!" Jonathan said. "I'll go, you stay."

"It'll be safer if we stick together!" Will shot back.

Jonathan considered for a moment. "Alright, come on. But stick close to me."

He strode to the tool shed and grabbed the bat from by the door. Together they walked into the edge of the woods again.

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Hop and Joyce trekked through the woods together slowly, the beam of light bouncing along ahead of them. In the dark all the trees looked the same, banding together to cast spooky shadows over the moonlit ground. Jim swallowed hard. His mind flashed back to a camping trip when he was eleven, getting lost alone in the dark in the foreboding woods. He had spent all night in the woods until his father found him in the wee hours of the morning. He had gotten a stern talking to about leaving the campsite.

Now was thankful for Joyce's warmth at his back.

She surprised him, grabbing at the back of his shirt when she tripped over a tree root. "Shit!" She cursed quietly from the ground. Jim had wheeled around to kneel in front of her. "Hey are you okay?" She rubbed at her knee. "Yeah, I just fell really hard on it." She replied. He offered her a hand and pulled her back onto her feet. They began

walking blindly into the woods again.

In the distance a shape began to emerge.

The house stood large and imposing in the darkness. The absence of light in the windows ran a shiver up Joyce's spine. Hop's light brushed across a white fence, tented green with unchecked plant growth. "Did you know there was a property back here?" He asked, half turning towards her. "No. Not at all." Hop tested the gate and it swung open with a creepy groan. "Oh, well isn't that nice." He said sarcastically, a frail attempt at humor. Joyce huffed behind him, fisting the khaki material of his shirt.

A massive white house stood in front of them, empty and cold. Its paint stained and dirty with age, peeling in large chunks in places. Joyce looked into its empty, broken windows and shivered. He edged closer to the house, gripping the handle of his pistol, every muscle in his body tensing. Joyce moved to his side, her hand fumbling in the darkness until her fingers grazed his, reaching out to intertwine them. She gave his hand a squeeze as they moved forward in the moonlight, the damp chill in the air making her shiver.

As they approached the porch he let go of her hand. "Stay here."

"Like hell I will!" She replied. Finding her resolve she walked ahead, wincing when the steps creaked beneath her feet. "Not smart Joyce, walking unarmed in front of the man with the gun." There was an old axe propped by the porch and she reached for it, giving it a light swing to test it. The handle was still sturdy enough for the heavy axe head and she held it ready, but she let him take the lead.

The front door resisted but with a shove of his shoulder he forced it open. Together they searched the living room. It was like a room frozen in time. It reminded Joyce too much of the frozen stillness of the upside down.

He left her in a moonlight patch of the decrepit kitchen as he swept room to room, gun and flashlight trained in front of him. Joyce peeked through a broken window as Jim called Lenny's name into the darkness. "Jim! The barn!" She called out.

He joined her in the kitchen, peering through the window at the faded red barn. The hayloft door stood open and a flickering light could be seen. "Well I guess I won't waste my time going upstairs." He said, a feeling of dread settling in his stomach.

"Why would Will see a barn? What's in there, Hop?" She reached for his hand.

"Past experience tells me whatever it is, that's where Lenny is."

"Is it the Upside Down?" Joyce asked lowly.

"Probably so. I mean, it could be another gate." He said, squeezing her hand.

Outside, Hop shot her a glance at the barn door. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be." She replied, readying her axe. He held his gun steadily trained at the barn door.

He threw open the door and they both stared into the inky blackness, broken at times by a sickening greenish light. The breath caught in their throats as they recognized another gate into the Upside Down. Just like last time. Just like with Will. Jim swept around the room, leaving Joyce's side as she stared in horror at the gate. After he climbed to check the hayloft he started advancing on the gate.

"Jim! Something's in there! I mean I thought the monster was dead, but something had to have taken Lenny." She said grabbing for his arms. "We don't even know if Eleven killed the other one. What if this is the same monster? We can't kill it!"

"I can damn sure try." He said advancing on the gate. He stepped forward, reaching out to touch the gate. It seemed to shiver under his touch. He reached back for her hand as they stepped through. They had been here before, they can do it again.

Specks of the snowy substance landed in Joyce's hair as Jim turned to look at her. He pulled her close and kissed her quickly to calm his

nerves and hopefully hers. She stared doe eyed at him when he pulled away "Where do we start looking?" He asked.

"He disappeared in the woods behind my house. Lets try there. And the house we just came through. I doubt he went far."

"Lenny!" Hop called lowly as they searched each room of Joyce's house, the upside down version of it. Joyce shivered at this warped version of her own home. "Hey Hop, all clear." Joyce called. He nodded in response to her and they began making their way to the woods behind the house.

"How are we supposed to find him here?" Joyce asked, looking at the woods hopelessly.

"We stick to the path we took. I doubt he strayed far." Hopper said quietly. The woods, foreboding in their world, was even worse here. They both called Lenny's name into the darkness.

In the end their search of the woods was fruitless and they moved onto the abandoned house. "Stay with me." Hopper encouraged her. She lingered at his back as they searched room to room, his flashlight and gun trained ahead of them as Joyce gripped her axe tightly.

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"Hop-" came a low, gravely voice from the corner of the master bedroom.

"Lenny!" Joyce called, rushing to the old man's side. His side was gashed open, the red blood soaking his side. Lenny was white as a sheet. Joyce helped him to his feet.

"There's a monster, we have to get out of here." Lenny said quietly at Joyce's side as he held his wound.

"Stay close to me." Hopper breathed.

They were almost into the barn when there was a flash in Hopper's peripheral, and a blinding pain in his shoulder as Joyce cried out to him. He wheeled around, brandishing his gun and fired a few shots at

the monster. "Take him and go, run Joyce!" He urged as he fought the monster. Joyce brandished her axe and swung, and the monster cried out in pain. "Run Hopper!"

Lenny fell through the gate and Joyce followed behind him. "Will, Jonathan!" She said, noticing her boys for the first time. They ran to their mother and helped Lenny up.

"Where's Hop?" Will asked frantically and Joyce looked back to the gate sadly. "I'm going back for him."

"Mom, no!" Jonathan urged.

"I'm not just going to leave him in there!" Joyce scolded, headed back for the gate. Before she could step back through Jim fell through it, clutching his shoulder. "It's coming, run!"

Will strode past everyone, hand outstretched. "Will, what are you-" before Joyce could finish her sentence he lay his hand on the gate and closed his eyes. The gate shuddered beneath his hand.

Everyone watched as the gate began to mend, closing before their eyes. Hopper gaped at Joyce, both shocked by his new found power.

Lenny coughed, drawing everyone's attention back to the task at hand. "We have to get him to a hospital." Joyce said, grabbing him by the shoulder. Jonathan grabbed the other and together they helped him stand. Hopper grabbed Will by his uninjured arm. "Come on kid."